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# from Hotel de Dream

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# From *Hotel de Dream*

EDMUND WHITE

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## I

CORA NEVER THOUGHT for a moment that her young husband could die. Other people—especially that expensive specialist who'd come down for the day from London and stuck his long nose into every corner of Brede Place and ended up charging her fifty pounds!—he'd whispered that Stevie's lungs were so bad and his body so thin and his fever so persistent that he must be close to the end. But then, contradicting himself, he'd said if another hemorrhage could be held off for three weeks he might improve.

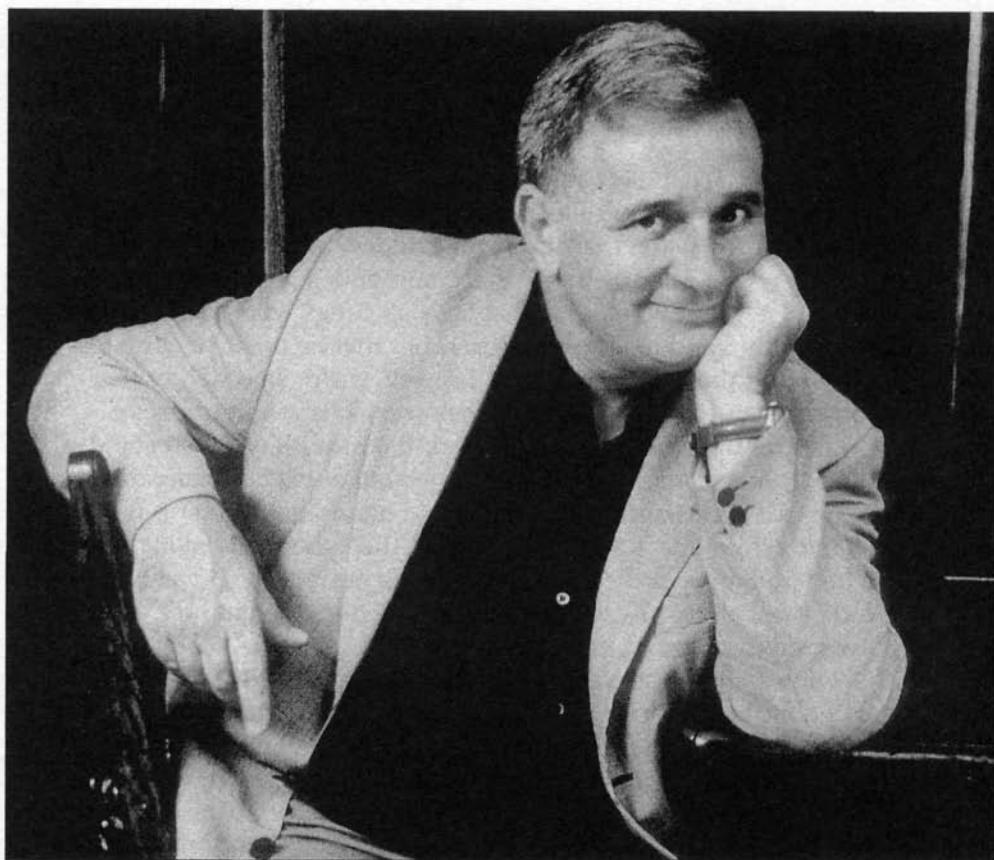
It was true that she had had a shock the other day when she'd bathed Stephen from head to foot and looked at his body standing in the tub like a classroom skeleton. She'd had to hold him up with one hand while she washed him with the other. His skin was stretched taut against the kettledrum of his pelvis.

And hot—he was always hot and dry. He himself said he was "a dry twig on the edge of the bonfire."

"Get down, Tolstoï, don't bother him," Cora shouted at the tatterdemalion mutt. It slipped off its master's couch and trotted over to her, sporting its feathery tail high like a white standard trooped through the dirty ranks. She unconsciously snuggled her fingers under his silky ears and he blinked at the unexpected pleasure.

The newspapers kept running little items at the bottom of the page headlined, "Stephen Crane, the American Author, Very Ill." The next day they announced that the American author was improving. She'd been the little bird to drop that particular seed about improvement down their gullets.

Poor Stephen—she looked at his head as he gasped on the pillow. She knew that even in sleep his dream was full of deep,



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beautiful thoughts and not just book-learning! No, what a profound wisdom of the human heart he'd tapped into. And his thoughts were clothed in such beautiful raiments.

This little room above the massive front oak door was his study, where now he was wheezing, listless and half-asleep, on the daybed. The whole room smelled of dogs and mud. At one end, under the couch and Stephen's table, there lay a threadbare Persian carpet, pale and silky but discolored on one side with a large tea-stain the shape of Borneo. At the other end of the room it had amused Stephen to throw rushes on the floor as if he were a merry old soul living in crude, medieval splendor. There were reeds and rushes and grass everywhere downstairs, which confused two of the three dogs, Tolstoi and Spongie, into thinking they were outdoors: they weren't always mindful of their best housebroken comportment.

The maid, a superstitious old thing, had placed a small jar of tar under Stephen's bed. Did she think it would absorb the evil spirits, or hold off the ghosts that were supposed to haunt Brede Place?

Yes, Stephen had all the symptoms, what the doctors called the "diathesis," or *look* of consumption: nearly transparent skin, through which blue veins could be seen ticking, and a haggard face and a cavernous, wheezing chest. His hair was as lank and breakable as old lamp fringe. His voice was hoarse from so much coughing and sometimes he sounded as if he were an owl hooting in the innermost chamber of a deep cave. He complained of a buzzing in the ears and even temporary deafness, which terrified a "socialist" like him, the friendliest man on earth (it was Cora's companion, the blameless but dim Mrs. Ruedy, who had worked up this very special, facetious, meaning of *socialist*). Cora wondered idly if Mrs. Ruedy was back in America yet—another rat deserting the sinking ship.

Cora glimpsed something bright yellow and pushed back Stephen's shirt—oh! the doctor had painted the right side of his torso with iodine. At least they weren't blistering him. She remembered how one of the "girls" in her house, the Hotel de Dream, in Jacksonville, had had those hot jars applied to her back and bust in order to raise painful blisters, all to no avail. She'd already been a goner.

"Hey, Imogene," Stephen murmured, his pink-lidded eyes fluttering open. He smiled, a faint echo of his usual playfulness. He

liked to call her "Imogene Carter," the nom de plume she'd made up for herself when she was a war correspondent in Greece and which she still used for the gossip columns and fashion notes she sent to American newspapers.

"What is it, Stevie?" she asked, crouching beside him.

"Tell me," he said, "is the truth bitter as eaten fire?"

Oh, she thought. He's quoting himself. One of his poems. A kind of compliment, probably, since in the very next stanza, she recalled, there was something about his love living in his heart. Or maybe it was just idle chatter and all he wanted was something to say, something that would hold her there.

"I see," he said in so soft a whisper that she had to bend her ear closer to his lips, "I see you're airing your hair." He was making fun of her habit of loosening her long golden hair two or three hours every day and letting it flow over her shoulders. Arnold Bennett had been horrified, she'd been told, by her undressed hair when he dropped in unexpected for lunch one day. He'd told Mrs. Conrad (who'd unkindly passed the gossip along) that Cora's Greek sandals and her diaphanous chiton-like wrapper and loose hair made her look "horrible, like an actress at breakfast." But Mr. Bennett didn't have much hair nor would it ever have been his chief glory. There was nothing glorious about him except his prose, and that only intermittently.

No, Cora firmly believed that a woman must let her hair down every day for a spell if it were to remain vigorous and shiny (she'd heard that Sarah Bernhardt did the same; at sixty she looked thirty).

"Yes," Cora said. She was going to add, "We all need to breathe," but censored herself—that would be cruel to say to the gasping man.

Embarrassed, she blurted out, "We're going to Germany, Stephen." She hadn't intended on saying anything yet about her newest scheme to cure him, but now she had to continue. "To the Black Forest." She liked the sound of that, the name of her favorite cake—and also something solemn and shaded like the scene of a cruel fairy tale involving children and death by oven. "We've got to get you out of this damp country with its cold rains and harsh winds."

"Oh, Cora, Cora, I love the way you discourse," Stevie said, raising his finger to her cheek and touching its softness with

something as dry and stiff as a gull's wing found on the beach after a long winter.

He indicated, with a shift of his eyes, the Sussex countryside just outside the window: green, peacefully rioting with wild-flowers.

"It's fair *now*," she said, "but if you want all four seasons, just stick around for a day."

She asked him about the trip to Germany. She knew he didn't usually like to discuss his failing health with her. She'd overheard him upbraiding someone for asking her hard questions about her future alone. "Don't upset Cora," Stevie had said. "It's a funny woman thing, but I think she likes me."

Now she told him how this German clinic was considered the best in the world. The same Dr. Koch who'd isolated the tuberculosis germ ten or fifteen years ago was behind this clinic at Badenweiler, which looked out on blooming fruit trees and stood on the edge of the Black Forest. After all, the Germans knew how to do these things, everyone else was an amateur.

Stevie echoed her very French pronunciation of *amateur*. She knew he liked to mock everything foreign in American expatriates, especially their linguistic affectations. The more Henry James fluted away like an English matron, the more Stevie when around him tried to sound like Daniel Boone or Andrew Jackson. Of course there was a serious concern buried under the tomfoolery; he was always so worried he'd forget the authentic American voice, that he'd start sounding like a limey, or like nothing at all. That was the worst: linguistic limbo.

## II

THE LAST GOOD BOOK I was writing was the one Hamlin Garland made me destroy. I wonder if I could write something now about my own life. I've never done that. What would I write? What would I say about myself?

I wish Cora would stop talking about my health. It's a jinx! Not that I really care what happens to me, I never wanted to live past thirty—but that's still two years away.... Keats and Byron: they got out young.



My mind is so full of money, twenty pounds here and fifty pounds there—of all the vast sums I owe and the meager payments I'm due—that I can't think of anything serious. Nor of anything frivolous, like this silly book, *The O'Ruddy*. I've got to dash it off. I suppose Cora will have the final installment on that if I die. Oh, I won't die, but Cora's blasted trip she's got planned for me to this miraculous German clinic could put me out of commission for a few months....

In Germany, is that where they practice pneumothorax? Is that what they call puncturing the lung and letting it deflate altogether?

These croakers have no idea what they're doing, not even the Germans. A bacillus, yes, but how to kill it? Their treatments all feel like fighting a horsefly with a slingshot. They want me to sleep in the great outdoors, even in winter, or, failing that, with my head sticking out the window. Or they want me to gorge on a second breakfast. Or repose on a sleeping porch, as if cold gales and ice crusting the water glass were ever a cure-all. No music, no sex, no conversation, except with dull old women, as if any form of stimulation were fatal. They're all charlatans. Somebody told me the other day—was it Wells?—that I'd never die from a hemorrhage, since he was coughing blood himself just a year ago. Of course he's always exercising on that bicycle with the giant wheel he devised, or pumping up and down on that lovely young wife of his, who's so under his spell she's changed her Christian name to suit him! Her name wasn't originally Jane but Amy. But Wells didn't like Amy. Damn good of him to say that to me, about my prospects; a fellow needs a bit of encouragement on some dim days.

If only Cora could locate her last husband and divorce him, I'd marry her (we tell everyone we're married but we're not) and she'd inherit all my future royalties, if there are to be any. And why not? *The Red Badge* is all right. Yes, I'm certain of that. It's still selling. People could never believe I hadn't seen a second of combat. The *Badge* was before my wars in Cuba, in Greece—well, when I did go to my wars they proved that the old *Badge* was all right. And my little whore novel, that's real enough to survive. Again, I wrote that before I became a reporter on the low-life beat.

I *have* written a few decent things recently. My yarn about the Wild West was good: solid. But no, not much else. Most of it blather. Now critics are saying I never knew what I was doing. That

the good things—*The Red Badge*, “The Open Boat,” “The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky,” “The Blue Hotel”—were just happy hits. Damn them! I took six weeks to write “The Blue Hotel.” I had such a strong feeling that the Swede felt fated to die, that he was shaking in fear in anticipation of his death that very day, though in reality he had nothing or no one to fear, and in the end he was the one who provoked the violence. Even in Cora’s newspaper columns I could always put in a good word or two—something fresh and queer. Most writing is self-dictating: yard goods. I was the only one of my generation to add a beat here and steal a note there. Rubato, it’s called in music; Hunecker told me that.

I’d written forty pages of my boy-whore book, Garland read them over and then with all his Wisconsin gravity in that steel-cutting voice he said, “These are the best pages you’ve ever written and if you don’t tear them up, every last word, you’ll never have a career.” He handed the pages back to me and asked, “No copies? This is the one and only version?”

“This is the one and only,” I said.

“Then you must cast it into that fire,” he said, for we were sitting in a luxurious hotel lobby on Mercer Street, waiting for a friend to descend, and a little fire was burning just a yard away from our boots.

I couldn’t help feeling that Hamlin *envied* me my pages. He’d never written anything so raw and new, so *modern*, and urban. No, he has his rolling periods and his yarns about his father playing the defeated pioneer farmer in the Dakotas, but he couldn’t have written my pages. No, Hamlin with his lips so white they looked as if he’d kissed a snowman, all the whiter because wreathed by his wispy pale-brown beard and mustaches. His eyes sparkled with flint chips and he seemed so sure of himself. Of course I was writing about an abomination, though Elliott was just a kid, not a mildewed chump like Wilde—though you can find plenty of folks in England who knew him and would still defend him. We all hear them champion Wilde now, though no one stepped forward during the trial. Yeats was the only person who made sense when he talked about Wilde. Wilde’s trial and the publication of *The Red Badge* occurred in the same year, 1895. But he represented an old Europe, vicious and stinking of putrefaction, whereas the *Badge* is a solid thing, trim and spare.

I threw my forty pages in the fire. It made me sick. A pearl worth more than all my tribe. And all through the lunch, with its



oysters and baron of beef, I kept thinking the oysters were salty from my tears and the blood gathering in the silver serving dish—I thought that blood was my blood. I could barely eat and I couldn't follow the conversation with all its New York knowingness, reporter's shoptalk. Of course Hamlin hated my painted boy; he was even then scribbling his *Boy's Life on the Prairie* in all its banal decency. Not that I'd ever dreamed of defending my little Elliott, but I knew his story was more poignant than scabrous.

God, I'm sounding absurd with my blood and tears and my resentment of old Ham. Hamlin was the one who gave me the fifteen dollars I'd needed to redeem the second half of *The Badge* from the typist. He was the one who had told me I was doing great things and got *Maggie* to William Dean Howells, and then Howells launched my career. Despite all the labels flying around in those days—I was supposed to be "an impressionist" and then there was Garland's "veritism" and Howell's "realism"—despite the commitment to the gritty truth, it seemed that my truth, the truth about little Elliott, was too much for them to take on board.

Hamlin had been roundly criticized for saying in one of his books that a conductor had stared at a female passenger "like a sex-maniac." That was enough to win him universal censure in America. No untoward deeds—just the word "sex-maniac," and next thing you know he was being compared to the sulfurous Zola himself. Oh, he's considered the devil's own disciple because his heroes sweat and do not wear socks and eat cold huckleberry pie...

The only one who could cope with my Elliott was that mad, heavy-drinking, fast-talking, know-everything Jim Huneker. Jim would drink seventeen beers in an evening out and feel nothing. He'd teach piano to an all-Negro class at the conservatory off Seventeenth Street and then retire to his boardinghouse where he was in love with a married woman named Josephine.

Her husband, a Polish merchant, never touched her, so Huneker said. He'd just stare enraptured at her V-shaped corsage and succumb to a red-faced paroxysm of secret onanism. Huneker seduced the unhappy lady just by touching her, the first time a man had touched those perfect breasts. But he was a busy one—he once gave a dinner for all three of his ex-wives. He had a long, straight Roman nose he was so proud of that he liked to speak in profile,

which could be disconcerting. His very black crinkly hair sat on his white brow like a bad wig, but he made me pull on it once to prove to myself it was real.

Huneker was such a womanizer! I could write about him in a memoir, couldn't I? As a music critic he'd encouraged aspiring female singers to prejudice his reviews in their favor through what he called "horizontal methods." Huneker also had a quasi-scientific interest in inversion. Usually he'd scorn it. He condemned *Leaves of Grass* as the "Bible of the third sex." Initially he was hostile to the eccentric, effeminate pianist Vladimir de Pachmann; he feared that Pachmann's silly shenanigans onstage might damage the reputation of serious musicians before the usual audience of American philistines. Pachmann would stop a concert to say to a woman in the front row, "Madam, you're beating your fan in two-thirds time and I'm playing in seventh-eighths." Or for no good reason he'd interrupt his playing to pull his hoard of diamonds out of his pocket and sift them from one hand to another. Because of these hijinx Huneker called him "the Chopinzee," and they traded insults at Lüchow's when they first met and poured steins of beer over each other's head. But a year later they mellowed and Pachmann came to dinner and played for Huneker for five hours, till three in the morning.

Tchaikovsky also troubled Huneker for his indifference toward women. Huneker was particularly disturbed by the story that seconds after Tchaikovsky met Saint-Saëns, the composer of *Samson and Delilah*, they were both in women's clothes dancing the tarantella. When Tchaikovsky died, Huneker said he was "the most interesting if not the greatest composer of his day"; Huneker also defended Wilde and said the English were silly to abhor him after they'd courted him for years.

I was with Huneker one wintry day walking up the Bowery. We'd just had lunch at the old Mouquin's down at Fulton Market and we were strolling along in one of those brisk winds that drive ice needles through your face even in the pallisaded fastness of Manhattan. In spite of our sole meunière and red velvet banquette we were suffering from the elements. Sometimes weeks go by in New York and I scarcely notice if it's hot or cold, fair or cloudy—and then a stinky-hot day floats the reek of the tenements upstream, or the gods decide to dump four feet of snow on the

nation's busiest metropolis. And then the snow turns it into a creaking New England village.

The weak sunlight was filtering down through the rail slats of the overhead elevated tracks and every few minutes another train rumbled slowly past above our heads like a heavy hand on the keyboard. Beside us horses wearing blinkers were pulling carts down the center of our street between the El tracks. Their shaggy forms and pluming breath were scarcely visible through the blizzard of sideways snow. The dingy-white awnings on every building were bulging above the sidewalks under the weight of snow. The poor prostitutes in their scanty clothes were tapping with their nails on the windowpanes, trying to attract a bit of custom. One sad girl, all ribs and scrawny neck, huddled in a doorway and threw open her coat to show me her frozen wares. Huneker with his three plump wives and horizontal sopranos certainly couldn't bother even to sniff at these skinny desperadoes through his long Roman nose. We walked and walked until we decided we had had enough of the wind's icy tattooing of our faces. We were about to step into the Everett House on Fourth Avenue and Seventeenth Street to warm up.

Standing in the doorway was a slight youth with a thin face and dark violet eyes set close together and nearly crossed. He couldn't have been more than fifteen but he already had circles under his eyes. He smiled and revealed small, bad teeth, each sculpted by decay into something individual. He stepped toward us, and naturally we thought he was begging, but then I saw his face was painted—carmined lips and kohled eyes (the dark circles I'd noticed were just mascara smudged by the snow).

The boy stumbled and I caught his cold little hand in my bony paw. His eyes swam and floated up into his head; he fainted. Now I'm as frail as he was, but back then I was fit. I carried him into the Everett House.

He weighed so little that I wonder if he filled out his jacket and trousers with newspapers to keep warm, or to appear less skinny. There was the faint smell of a cheap woman's perfume about him and, because of the way I was holding him, the stink of dirty, oily hair that had absorbed cigarette smoke the night before.

I was ashamed of myself for feeling embarrassed about carrying this queer little boy tart into a hotel of well-fed, loud-talking men.

All of them were illuminated by Mr. Edison's new hundred-bulb chandelier. The doorman took a step toward us, so agitated that the gold fringe of his epaulets was all atremble; he held up a white glove. Idiotically I said, "Don't worry, he's with me," and good old Huneker, who's a familiar face there, said, "Good God, man, the boy's fainted and we're going to get some hot soup down him. That's what he needs, hot soup. Order us some hot soup!" Huneker went on insisting on the soup as if it answered all questions about propriety.

There was a table free but the headwaiter glanced at the manager—but he couldn't stop us. We headed right for the table, which was near Siberia, close to the swinging kitchen doors. I placed my frail burden in a chair and, just to bluff my way out of being intimidated I snapped my fingers and ordered some hot soup and a cup of tea. The headwaiter played with his huge menus like a fan dancer before he finally acquiesced and extended them to us. Slowly the businessmen at the other tables gave up gawking and returned to their conversations. Maybe that is why I was so sympathetic to Elliott, as I soon learned was his name. I'd had to carry him through a sea of disapproval.

Now that I looked at his painted face I feared I might vomit. Huneker was studying me and smiling almost satirically, as if he knew my discomfort might make a good story that very evening, when Josephine, she of the V-shaped corsage, held court. "Stephen pretends to be so worldly," I imagined he'd soon be saying, "but he is the son of a Methodist minister and a temperance-worker mother and he did grow up in darkest New Jersey, and though he's fraternized with hordes of daughters of joy he'd never seen a little ganymede butt-boy buggaree before, and poor Stephen—you should've seen his face, he nearly vomited just as the headwaiter was confiding, 'The joint won't be served till five.'"

Let him laugh. That was another thing I liked about Elliott: the boy became devoted to me, though ultimately I was unable to save him.